5: Spinel II-5 (ca. 1920) 1945 AX5 Vedda AX5

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CHAPTER IV

VILLAGE VEDDAS AND JUNGLE SHRINES

And here were forests ancient as the hills
Enclosing sunny spots of greenery

COLERIDGE

1. THE EMBRACE OF THE TREES

BURIED in the jungle ten miles north-west of Maha Oya lies the old Vedda village of Omuna. Forest, unbroken by the meanest glade, intervenes between. At a pool we flush a brace of bronze-winged pigeons or set a-chirruping a covey of small birds; while every now and then the scurry of unseen feet tells that the woods are live with game. Jungles darken early; by five-thirty a cathedral gloom creeps to the songs of roosting birds: the shama throats a rambling lay, the grubbing pitta sounds a shrill call, the cuckoo wakes, like a curfew, the forest echoes, "while like a long-roll drummer the night-jar thrills the treen."

It is all but dark when, through a break in the trees, the hill of Omuna stands before us; and the clamour of resenting dogs and a welcoming fire tell us we have reached the limit of an arduous walk.

Where the Vedda is, there is the inevitable rock. The tie between them is intimate. To the life, animal and tree, on the timbered sides of the hill the Vedda is beholden for sustenance. The boulder-bound stream gives him water, and there lurk demons watchful for his undoing, and tutelary ancestral spirits. Nowhere is the relation between men and rock closer than at Omuna; for from the heart of the hill flows a spring that does not fail in the cruellest drought. Is it a wonder the place has for ages been favoured of the Veddas? But time the iconoclast breaks the oldest bonds; the half-Veddas* there to-day are not of the ancient stock; that died out some fifteen years ago.

Besides its association with the wild men, Omuna has other claims to interest. Like many another forest stronghold it is the site of ancient Buddhistic ruins—frescoed caves and headless, chest-battered Buddhas despoiled by treasure-hunters What induced the priests of old-time to seek such sanctuaries as this, it is hard to surmise; religious persecution perhaps, by their inveterate foes the Sivaite Tamils; or merely the claims of austere devotion. Be that as it may, it was in these fastnesses that the light of Buddhism was nursed when it flickered low, till, happening

*There is almost certainly no Vedda living to-day without Sinhalese blood in his veins. The term *half-Vedda* therefore may appear superfluous, but is used to designate Veddas who have intermarried with the Sinhalese and settled down to agricultural pursuits, the word *Vedda* being used for the wilder folk that depend mainly on the jungle for sustenance.

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3. THE MARAWEETHIYA

Far or forgot to me is near,
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear
And one to me are shame and fame.

EMERSON

13 FROM Yakkure to Horiwila is six miles. The first part of the journey is through marsh; here the Mahaweli make a bend which all but encroaches on the path. The place is rank with vegetation. Tall grass thrives amidst sombre trees that stand apart, clothed out of all recognition in stoles of trailing mycania. The air is humid and oppressively still. One is glad to be rid of the swampy luxuriance with its strong suggestion of malaria.

Beyond a pleasant stretch of paddy, closer than we had ever seen it before, stood Gunner's Quoin. Tinkling cow-bells and the mournful cries of peafowl welcomed us to Horiwila.

361 144 The racial types we have passed, will repay review. Omuna, Dola-galwella and Kalukolu Eba were shifting *chena* settlements inhabited by Veddas with a large proportion of Sinhalese blood. Yakkure was a permanent village with the *chenas* apart; here the people called themselve Veddas but showed strong Tamil traits. The folk of Horiwila were not sure whether to call themselves Tamils or Veddas; while Manampitiya, beyond Horiwila, was a purely Tamil village. So does propinquity shape the type of Vedda, and forest penetration by the Sinhalese on the one hand and Tamils on the other, tend to obliterate the aboriginal race.

000 Decoyed by its beauty, we camped on a rock on the bund of the Horiwila tank, soon to learn that a stone exposed all day to the sun, was not the most desirable of camping places even at night. The stored heat radiating from the rock kept us awake till morning, and we rose quite unrefreshed for the good day's work before us, for to-day we would climb the Quoin, which, ever since we saw it across the marsh at Yakkure, beckoned us on. The Tamils of the place could only take us to the base 115 of the hill; from there a Vedda of the Ulpotta must guide us. It was quite an hour before we found him. I recognised him at once as Sinna an old friend; there were the bunions on his shoulder from carrying loads of lizards and yams, and there the hooked finger caused by a snake-bite [142 when plucking a *kanava* comb from a creviced tree. A dwarf, with 157] frizzly upstanding hair and wild eyes, and shy almost to timidity, Sinna had nothing of the sophisticated Vedda about him. He lived alone with [166] his small family at the end of the rock. The rest of his people had left when the *kurrukhan* crop failed: but Sinna remained to gather a precarious living from the scanty pickings of the field. We came on him searching for food in the forest.

The poor fellow was in great distress that morning, his favourite dog having been taken by a leopard the previous night. Hearing the animal's

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cries he had rushed in vain to the rescue. It speaks much for the dominance of man over animals that this puny fellow, armed only with a small hatchet, could live with impunity in such surroundings; and moreover leave his wife and children unprotected in their fragile leaf-hut while he was out in quest of food.

"Cha," I heard Sinna ruminating sorrowfully to himself, "the *goa*-catching dog is gone."

"Have you no other?" I asked.

"The one that's left isn't much good," he said. "With the bitch I lost I could catch six *goyas** a day."

The way to the caves was up the heavily-wooded, boulder-encumbered side of the hill, plentiful with caves of bear, porcupine and wild cat. On the sandy floor of one dark den were the footprints of a bear and her cubs that had just vacated it. Sinna was well ahead of us, as we clambered on trembling knees regardless of all else but where to gain foot-hold, when a timorous one called out to the Vedda from below, "There now, if a bear should come, don't you run away and climb a tree."

The little chap wagged his head acquiescingly. I asked him what he would do in such an event.

"We will also strike; he will also bite," was the cool reply.

Gaining a spur, at length we attained the first of the series of caves known as the Maraweethiya. A strong aroma of bats greeted us. Ant-hills grew out of the dusty floor of the cave, the plastered dome of which was ornamented with frescoes of Buddhas and *devas*. A decayed wooden image stood behind a flat altar stone supported on bricks, many of which lay fallen about. A broken wall partially shut in the cave, and another divided it off from a deep pool of crystalline water.

From here a passage protected by a low wall led through a narrow gulley flanked by small trees; thence by way of spurs, tunnels and deep grottoes we came to a shallow cave in full face of the sky, where we were the cause of much concern to a pair of peregrine falcons. They hovered above us crying perturbedly; now they would swoop boldly down almost within reach of our hands; now wing away with harsh cackling cries of alarm, as they discovered us handling their eggs, that lay amidst the debris of brick and tile.

Ahead was a fearsome pass, which we must negotiate to reach the last of the caves. It was no more than a shallow, sloping notch in the sheer side of the rock, overlooking a drop of about three hundred feet, and with seemingly nothing beyond it but eternity. On hands and knees we crawled through and were mightily relieved to find ourselves in the security of a large grotto. Here, before two patched stone images, we found a few of our carriers devoutly kneeling; on an altar-stone were their meagre oblations of ixora blooms they had gathered on the way. The virtue, it would seem, lay less in the quality of the offerings than in the attainment of this inhospitable shrine with its weathered and lonely gods.

We could go no farther; but hence along the crazy edge of the hill was the merest semblance of a break-neck way that led, we were told, to the ancient kingdom of the *rakshayas* (demons) with its foot-wide

*Monitor lizard

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13 causeway over an abysmal ravine. We had not the stomach to tempt those ways.

Below us stretched a vast forest studded with the tree-clad hills of Omuna, Henanagalla and many another; and over the red-topped *kongs* we caught the glimpse of the Mahaweli as it cleft the wilderness of trees.

173 To this retreat once came an ascetic who lived alone, lost in meditation, for months. His evening chant could be heard at Horiwila three miles away. The bears that came to drink at the pools in the caves did him no harm. In a hidden vault, so the story goes, he found a gold-lettered slab and a phial of oil. He made the wisdom of the script his own, and drank the oil; then descended the rock, and ever after went about as one obsessed.

115 [301] Sinna's droll talk relieved the irksomeness of our descent. Indicating a wild jasmine, he told us they were the flowers Vedda women strung on creeper-stems for the adornment of their hair. He was for leaving us at the foot of the hill and continuing his search for food for his waiting family. But we took him to camp, fed him abundantly on rice and venison and gave him a heavy hamper besides. It was pleasant to picture the rare joy of his home-coming.

000 At Manampitiya old Kanapan-*vidane* met us with two limes which he graciously presented to us. This charming Tamil custom is often the prelude to a villainous request. Kanapan gave us cordial welcome, eyed solicitously our unkempt figures, and chided us in a kindly, paternal way for undertaking so 'terrible' a journey. "Why wander in the wilderness when you can play about the highways in your car?" he said. His conversation, though varied kept reverting to one theme—the delinquencies of the village school-master, now away on a holiday. Kanapan had a penchant for denunciation; on a previous occasion it was the tyranny of an apothecary, now it concerned the amours of a pedagogue.

"Is that the sort of man to teach young children?" he concluded disgustedly. "A man who breaks up quiet homes. The woman does not even care for him; he bewitched her with charmed food. A respectable home wrecked by a worthless fellow!" and he spat with scorn.

Perhaps it was the full bottle of whisky standing tantalisingly on the table that induced him to confide in us that the village tavern had now been closed for over two years, during which time he had not touched a drink; he had almost forgotten the taste of liquor he said wistfully.

"Then you are a total abstainer now?" I ventured.

"What's to be done, sir, I have to be," he sighed.

"I suppose you wouldn't have a drink now if one were given you?" I asked.

"How can I refuse when a gentleman offers," said he, taking the wind out of my sails. "With your favour, sir, I will. Cha," he continued with sudden affection, "I feared you had been to the war and got killed. How glad I am to see you again, sir."

We poured him a bumper which he swallowed neat, placing the empty cup within easy reach beside him. He reverted to the school-master;